



## PRESS RELEASE

### **Private audience of Fr Michael Lapsley SSM, Director of the Institute for Healing of Memories (IHOM) - South Africa, with Pope Francis on 15 June 2019**

The audience was an encounter between the Holy Father and Fr Michael Lapsley SSM, who was accompanied by Philani Dlamini<sup>1</sup>, Patrick Byrne<sup>2</sup> and Javier García Alves<sup>3</sup>.

It was a very moving experience. Pope Francis and Fr Michael immediately got on extremely well. Same sense of humour, same direct language, same listening capacity, same priorities. And even a big hug at the end.

Fr Michael began by sharing some of his life journey including the pivotal experience of receiving a letter bomb which blew off both his hands amongst other injuries. Pope Francis was visibly moved by his story. Fr Michael then explained how his bombing in time led to his calling to create the healing of memories work which eventually led to the formation of the Institute for Healing of Memories (IHOM). This was initially in the damaged country of South Africa, as a complement to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and later across the world.

Fr Michael framed what he had to say overall in terms of the significant power of acknowledgement as a first step on the road to healing, both at the level of the IHOM across the world and in the context of the ministry of Pope Francis. He began by appreciating the role of the Holy Father in today's world, especially in the way he acknowledges the pain of the human family and always insists on mercy, compassion and solidarity, particularly towards the most disadvantaged and excluded people.

Fr Michael then referred to the meeting Pope Francis had had the previous day with representatives of the oil industry and the fact he had chastised them for their ongoing commitment to the further exploitation of fossil resources and its damaging impact on our common home. Pope Francis explained with a broad smile that he had just boxed them gently on the ears.

Fr Michael mentioned the numerous translations of his memoir, *Redeeming the Past* (14 language editions so far), including German, Spanish, French, Arabic and Thai, which shows that his story and the work of the IHOM has a universal resonance. He pointed out the two most common narratives in healing of memories workshops worldwide are gender-based violence (including both domestic and sexual violence) and childhood trauma. Pope Francis was nodding in recognition as this point was made.

Fr Michael explained that he wears more than one hat: on top of being director of the IHOM, he is the Canon for healing and reconciliation at Cape Town's Anglican Cathedral and also in Edmonton, in Canada. The Bishop of Edmonton, Jane Alexander, has written several times to the Holy Father asking him to visit Canada and apologize for the abuse by religious personnel in the residential schools over many years. Pope Francis responded immediately that there were already plans for such a visit in the Vatican pipeline.

Fr Michael added that one of the dreams of indigenous peoples across the world would be the explicit revocation of the Doctrine of Discovery by the Catholic Church.

He then mentioned the forthcoming visit of Pope Francis to Mozambique, where two important unacknowledged open wounds from the past are obstacles to the healing of the nation. There are the abuses by FRELIMO, notably the execution of some of their members, including a Catholic priest, Fr Mateus Pinho Gwenjere, the whereabouts of whose mortal remains are still unknown. There is also the identification of much of the Catholic Church with the occupying colonial power. Fr Michael gave Pope Francis a book on the life of Fr Gwenjere written by Lawe Laweki, who also sent two personal messages to the Holy Father.

Many peace activists are hoping that non-violence and the renouncing of any idea of a just war would be the theme for a new papal encyclical. This led to an observation by the Holy Father about the complicity of the major powers with war through their leading role and involvement with the arms industry.

Fr Michael expressed his profound appreciation for opposition of Pope Francis to the death penalty, which is now reflected in the Catechism of the Catholic Church. This is part of the fruit of years of campaigning by organizations such as Amnesty International and ACAT (Action by Christians for the Abolition of Torture).

Before the end of the audience, Fr Michael referred to the desire of the IHOM to upscale its work in South Africa and across the world. Then he asked the Holy Father for ways of obtaining further support from Catholic Church bodies. Pope Francis made a number of suggestions.

The conversation also included its light moments, with Pope Francis and Fr Michael enjoying their shared sense of humour. The Holy Father mentioned that a sense of humour is probably the closest thing to the grace of God. He referred to St Thomas More's *Prayer for Good Humour*, which he prays daily.

Fr Michael then told Pope Francis that he could have brought several thousand people with him for the audience including so many of his Facebook friends and that many of them were greeting him. Pope Francis responded with a big smile and waved his arms saying that there was plenty of space to bring all of them and that he was greeting them back.

Fr Michael gave the Holy Father two signed copies of his memoir, *Redeeming the Past*, one in English and another in Spanish.

At the end of the audience, Pope Francis gave the delegation his blessing and asked each of its members to pray for him.

The delegation's time in Rome was greatly facilitated by George H. Johannes, South African Ambassador to the Holy See, who shares with Fr Michael a common past in the struggle against apartheid.

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- (1) Of the Institute for Healing of Memories (IHOM) in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa.
  - (2) Honorary President of the International Federation of Action by Christians for the Abolition of Torture (FIACAT) and co-coordinator of the Healing of Memories Support Group Europe.
  - (3) Translator of the three Spanish editions of Fr Michael's memoir, *Redeeming the Past*, and co-coordinator of the Healing of Memories Support Group Europe.

*Fr Michael will be available for interviews in Rome on Monday, 17 June and in Cape Town from 19 June onwards, on WhatsApp +27 82 416 2766 and on [michaelssm@gmail.com](mailto:michaelssm@gmail.com).*